

Sleepwalking to disaster in Iran

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Late last year, in the aftermath of the 2004 Presidential election, I was contacted by someone close to the Bush administration about the situation in Iraq.

There was a growing concern inside the Bush administration, this source said, about the direction the occupation was going.

The Bush administration was keen on achieving some semblance of stability in Iraq before June 2005, I was told.

When I asked why that date, the source dropped the bombshell: because that was when the Pentagon was told to be prepared to launch a massive aerial attack against Iran, Iraq's neighbour to the east, in order to destroy the Iranian nuclear programme.

Why June 2005?, I asked. 'The Israelis are concerned that if the Iranians get their nuclear enrichment programme up and running, then there will be no way to stop the Iranians from getting a nuclear weapon. June 2005 is seen as the decisive date.'

To be clear, the source did not say that President Bush had approved plans to bomb Iran in June 2005, as has been widely reported.

The President had reviewed plans being prepared by the Pentagon to have the military capability in place by June 2005 for such an attack, if the President ordered.

But when Secretary of State Condi Rice told America's European allies in February 2005, in response to press reports about a pending June 2005 American attack against Iran, she said that 'the question [of a military strike] is simply not on the agenda at this point — we have diplomatic means to do this.'

President Bush himself followed up on Rice's statement by stating that 'This notion that the United States is getting ready to attack Iran is simply ridiculous.' He quickly added, 'Having said that, all options are on the table.'

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In short, both the President and the Secretary of State were being honest, and disingenuous, at the same time.

Truth to be told, there is no American military strike on the agenda; that is, until June 2005.

It was curious that no one in the American media took it upon themselves to confront the President or his Secretary of State about the June 2005 date, or for that matter the October 2004 review by the President of military plans to attack Iran in June 2005.

The American media today is sleepwalking towards an American war with Iran with all of the incompetence and lack of integrity that it displayed during a similar path trodden during the buildup to our current war with Iraq.

On the surface, there is nothing extraordinary about the news that the President of the United States would order the Pentagon to be prepared to launch military strikes on Iran in June 2005 .

That Iran has been a target of the Bush administration's ideologues is no secret: the President himself placed Iran in the 'axis of evil' back in 2002, and has said that the world would be a better place with the current Iranian government relegated to the trash bin of history.

The Bush administration has also expressed its concern about Iran's nuclear programmes – concerns shared by Israel and the European Union, although to different degrees.

In September 2004, Iran rejected the International Atomic Energy Agency's call for closing down its nuclear fuel production programme (which many in the United States and Israel believe to be linked to a covert nuclear weapons programme).

Iran then test fired a ballistic missile with sufficient range to hit targets in Israel as well as US military installations in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

The Iranian response triggered a serious re-examination of policy by both Israel and the United States.

The Israeli policy review was driven in part by the Iranian actions, and in part by Israel's own intelligence assessment regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, made in August 2004 .

This assessment held that Iran was 'less than a year' away from completing its uranium enrichment programme. If Iran was allowed to reach this benchmark, the assessment went on to say, then it had reached the 'point of no return' for a nuclear weapons programme. The date set for this 'point of no return' was June 2005.

Israel's Defense Minister, Shaul Mofaz, declared that 'under no circumstances would Israel be able to tolerate nuclear weapons in Iranian possession'.

Since October 2003 Israel had a plan in place for a pre-emptive strike against Iran's major nuclear facilities, including the nuclear reactor facility in Busher (scheduled to become active in 2005).

These plans were constantly being updated, something that did not escape the attention of the Bush White House.

The Israeli policy toward Iran, when it comes to stopping the Iranian nuclear programme, has always been for the US to lead the way.

'The way to stop Iran', a senior Israeli official has said, 'is by the leadership of the US, supported by European countries and taking this issue to the UN, and using the diplomatic channel with sanctions as a tool and a very deep inspection regime and full transparency.'

It seems that Tel Aviv and Washington, DC aren't too far removed on their Iranian policy objectives, except that there is always the unspoken 'twist': what if the United States does not fully support European diplomatic initiatives, has no interest in letting IAEA inspections work, and envisions UN sanctions as a permanent means of containment until regime change is accomplished in Tehran, as opposed to a tool designed to compel Iran to cooperate on eliminating its nuclear programme?

Because the fact is, despite recent warm remarks by President Bush and Condi Rice, the US does not fully embrace the EU's Iran diplomacy, viewing it as a programme 'doomed to fail'.

The IAEA has come out with an official report, after extensive inspections of declared Iranian nuclear facilities in November 2004, that says there is no evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons programme; the Bush administration responded by trying to oust the IAEA's lead inspector, Mohammed al-Baradei.

And the Bush administration's push for UN sanctions shows every intention of making such sanctions deep, painful and long-lasting.

Curiously, the date for the Bush administration's move to call for UN sanctions against Iran is June 2005.

According to a US position paper circulated in Vienna at the end of last month, the US will give the EU-Iran discussions until June 2005 to resolve the Iranian standoff.

'Ultimately only the full cessation and dismantling of Iran's fissile material production efforts can give us any confidence that Iran has abandoned its nuclear weapons ambitions,' the US draft position paper said.

Iran has called such thinking 'hallucinations' on the part of the Bush administration.

The American media today is sleepwalking towards an American war with Iran

Economic sanctions and military attacks are not one and the same. Unless, of course, the architect of America's Iran policy never intends to give sanctions a chance.

Enter John Bolton, who, as the former US undersecretary of state for arms control and international security for the Bush administration, is responsible for drafting the current US policy towards Iran.

In February 2004, Bolton threw down the gauntlet by stating that Iran had a 'secret nuclear weapons programme' that was unknown to the IAEA. 'There is no doubt that Iran has a secret nuclear weapons production programme', Bolton said, without providing any source to back up his assertions.

This is the same John Bolton who had in the past accused Cuba of having an offensive biological weapons programme, a claim even Bush administration hardliners had to distance themselves from.

John Bolton is the Bush official who declared the European Union's engagement with Iran 'doomed to fail'. He is the Bush administration official who led the charge to remove Muhammad al-Baradai from the IAEA.

And he is the one who, in drafting the US strategy to get the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions against Iran, asked the Pentagon to be prepared to launch 'robust' military attacks against Iran should the UN fail to agree on sanctions.

Bolton understands better than most the slim chances any US-brokered sanctions regime against Iran has in getting through the Security Council.

The main obstacle is Russia, a permanent member of the Security Council who not only possesses a veto, but also is Iran's main supporter (and supplier) when it comes to its nuclear power programme.

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John Bolton has made a career out of alienating the Russians. Bolton was one of the key figures who helped negotiate a May 2002 arms reduction treaty signed by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

This treaty was designed to reduce the nuclear arsenals of both America and Russia by two thirds over a 10 year period.

But that treaty - to Russia's immense displeasure - now appears to have been made mute thanks to a Bolton-inspired legal loophole that the Bush administration had built into the treaty language.

John Bolton knows Russia will not go along with UN sanctions against Iran, which makes the military planning being conducted by the Pentagon all the more relevant.

John Bolton's nomination as the next US Ambassador to the United Nations is as curious as it is worrying. This is the man who, before a panel discussion sponsored by the World Federalist Association in 1994, said 'There is no such thing as the United Nations.'

For the United States to submit to the will of the Security Council, Bolton wrote in a 1999 Weekly Standard article, would mean that 'its discretion in using force to advance its national interests is likely to be inhibited in the future.'

But John Bolton doesn't let treaty obligations, such as those incurred by the United States when it signed and ratified the UN Charter, get in the way. 'Treaties are law only for US domestic purposes', he wrote in a 17 November 1997 Wall Street Journal Op Ed. 'In their international operation, treaties are simply political obligations.'

John Bolton believes that Iran should be isolated by United Nations sanctions and, if Iran will not back down from its nuclear programme, confronted with the threat of military action.

And as the Bush administration has noted in the past, particularly in the case of Iraq, such threat must be real and meaningful, and backed by the will and determination to use it.

And the Bush administration's push for UN sanctions shows every intention of making such

sanctions deep, painful and long-lasting.

John Bolton and others in the Bush administration contend that, despite the lack of proof, Iran's nuclear intentions are obvious.

In response, the IAEA's Muhammad al-Baradai has pointed out the lack of a 'smoking gun' which would prove Iran's involvement in a nuclear weapons programme. 'We are not God', he said. 'We cannot read intentions.'

But, based upon history, precedent, and personalities, the intent of the United States regarding Iran is crystal clear: the Bush administration intends to bomb Iran.

Whether this attack takes place in June 2005, when the Pentagon has been instructed to be ready, or at a later date, once all other preparations have been made, is really the only question that remains to be answered.

That, and whether the journalists who populate the mainstream American media will continue to sleepwalk on their way to facilitating yet another disaster in the Middle East.

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